

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Futures

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/futures

Public perceptions of future threats to humanity and different societal responses: A cross-national study



Melanie Randle^{a,*}, Richard Eckersley^b

^a School of Management, Operations and Marketing, Australian Health Services Research Institute, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong, Northfields Ave, Wollongong, NSW 2500, Australia

^b Australia 21 Ltd., 23 Garland Rd., Bundanoon, NSW 2578, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 February 2015

Received in revised form 31 May 2015

Accepted 23 June 2015

Available online 7 July 2015

Keywords:

Global futures

Human extinction

Catastrophic threats

Public perceptions

ABSTRACT

There is growing scientific evidence that humanity faces a number of threats that jeopardize its future. Public perceptions of these threats, both their risks and reactions to them, are important in determining how humanity confronts and addresses the threats. This study investigated the perceived probability of threats to humanity and different responses to them (nihilism, fundamentalism and activism), in four Western nations: the US, UK, Canada and Australia. Overall, a majority (54%) rated the risk of our way of life ending within the next 100 years at 50% or greater, and a quarter (24%) rated the risk of humans being wiped out at 50% or greater. The responses were relatively uniform across countries, age groups, gender and education level, although statistically significant differences exist.

Almost 80% agreed “we need to transform our worldview and way of life if we are to create a better future for the world” (activism). About a half agreed that “the world’s future looks grim so we have to focus on looking after ourselves and those we love” (nihilism), and over a third that “we are facing a final conflict between good and evil in the world” (fundamentalism). The findings offer insight into the willingness of humanity to respond to the challenges identified by scientists and warrant increased consideration in scientific and political debate.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Scientific evidence and concern are mounting that humanity faces a defining moment in history, a time when we must address growing adversities, or suffer grave consequences. Reputable journals are canvassing the possibilities, including special issues of *Scientific American* ([The end, 2010](#)) and *Futures* ([Human extinction, 2009](#)). Most focus today is on climate change and its many, potentially catastrophic, impacts; other threats include depletion and degradation of natural resources and ecosystems; continuing world population growth; disease pandemics; global economic collapse; nuclear and biological war and terrorism; and runaway technological change ([Dator, 2009](#); [Tonn & MacGregor, 2009](#); [Hamilton, 2010](#); [Halal & Marien, 2011](#); [Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2013](#)). Threats not linked to human activities are a supervolcanic eruption and an asteroid collision ([Tonn & MacGregor, 2009](#)).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mrandle@uow.edu.au (M. Randle), richard@richardeckersley.com.au (R. Eckersley).

Many of these threats are not new; scientists and other experts have warned of the dangers for decades. Nevertheless, the evidence is growing stronger, especially about climate change, and never before have their possible impacts been so powerfully reinforced by actual events, including natural disasters and calamities, and their sustained and graphic media coverage. Not surprisingly, surveys reveal widespread public pessimism about the future of the world, at least in Western countries, including a common perception of declining quality of life, or that future generations will be worse off (Eckersley, 2005; Eckersley, Cahill, & Wierenga, 2007; Eckersley, 2013). However, there appears to have been little recent research into people's perceptions of how dire humanity's predicament is, including the risk of the collapse of civilization, or human extinction. These perceptions have a significant bearing on how societies, and humanity as a whole, will deal with potentially catastrophic futures.

One such study is a 2004 international web survey, which found 45% of 600 respondents believed humans would become extinct (Tonn, 2009). However, the timeframe here was long: many felt this would happen within 500–1000 years, and some in 5000 years or more.

A 2005 survey of 1000 Australians asked which of two scenarios of the world in the 21st century more closely reflected their view (Eckersley et al., 2007):

“By continuing on its current path of economic and technological development, humanity will overcome the obstacles it faces and enter a new age of peace and prosperity.”

“More people, environmental destruction, new diseases and ethnic and regional conflicts mean the world is heading for a bad time of crisis and trouble.”

Two thirds of respondents (66%) chose the pessimistic scenario, less than a quarter (23%) the optimistic scenario. Compared to an earlier survey in 1995, pessimism had increased (Eckersley et al., 2007).

A 2011 study on “the Global Megacrisis” includes a bibliography and proposes four scenarios for how humanity deals with the multiple and interconnected threats posed by climate change and other critical issues (Halal & Marien, 2011). Sixty “smart and thoughtful people” rated the relative probabilities of each scenario:

Decline to disaster: World fails to react. More global warming, widespread energy and water shortages, economic depression, conflict, etc. Loss of civilization in many parts of the world (25% average probability).

Muddling down: World reacts partially, but problems continue to outdistance policies and technologies, ecological damage continues, increased poverty and conflict (35%).

Muddling up: World reacts out of need and the help of information technology/artificial intelligence. Policies and technologies gain on problems. Disaster avoided but some disorder and disappointment (28%).

Rise to maturity: Ideal transition to a humane and responsible global order (12%).

How people react to the possibility of catastrophic futures (as distinct from their perception of their likelihood) will also shape how effectively humanity deals with the grave dangers. People can respond in very different ways to the same perception of threat, including apocalyptic suspicions about the 21st century (Eckersley, 2007, 2008). The responses include: nihilism (the loss of belief in a social or moral order; decadence rules), fundamentalism (the retreat to certain belief; dogma rules), and activism (the transformation of belief; hope rules). The categories make sharp distinctions between responses to highlight their differences and significance. In reality, the categories are fuzzy, reflecting tendencies or deviations from the norm, with subtle to extreme expressions. They are not mutually exclusive responses, but can overlap, co-exist and change over time in individuals and groups.

This study investigated the perceived probability of future threats to humanity, specifically whether “our existing way of life will end”, and whether “humans will be wiped out”, within the next 100 years. It also examined the level of agreement with three pairs of statements reflecting strong and weak nihilistic, fundamentalist and activist responses (while fundamentalism includes secular forms such as neoliberalism or market fundamentalism, the statements focused on religious fundamentalism). The study also assessed the association between global fears and levels of personal concern with a range of global or societal issues and personal issues (these concerns will be considered in depth in a separate paper). The questions comprised one part of a large survey of representative samples, totalling 2073 people, in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sample

Individuals qualified to participate in the study if they were 18 years or over and a citizen or permanent resident of the US, UK, Canada or Australia. Quotas were imposed to ensure samples for each country were nationally representative for age, sex and region of residence. The total sample size was 2073. Appendix 1 details the sample characteristics in terms of sex, age, education, employment status, employment position, relationship status and children.

2.2. Data collection

Data was collected in January–February 2013 via online research panel company Survey Sampling International (SSI). The invitation to participate was sent to a nationally representative sample in each country and was available online until the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1015442>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1015442>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)